

Effective Practices for Teaching Academic Vocabulary

What is Academic Vocabulary?

Academic vocabulary is the vocabulary critical to understanding the concepts of the content taught in schools. It is vocabulary that supports student comprehension of instructional content. Academic vocabulary exposes students to the word origins, multiple meanings of words, and reference to abstract concepts that relate and connects directly to the targeted content area.



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The Need for Academic Vocabulary (Research)

- Academic vocabulary is one of the strongest indicators of how well students will learn subject area content when they come to school (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).
- Academic vocabulary is crucial to improving both reading comprehension and verbal IQ (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).
- Academic vocabulary prepares students for academic success by helping them preview, build background knowledge, learn and practice vocabulary in subject area content (Marzano and Pickering, 2005).
- Vocabulary accounts for over half of the impact of all factors that influence reading comprehension (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).
- The more students understand academic vocabulary terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic (Marzano and Pickering, 2005).
- Students need assistance and practice with the academic words that help them think, write, and speak with precision in school even if those terms are not specific to the content area (Marzano and Pickering, 2005).

A Model for Comprehensive Vocabulary Development

A comprehensive vocabulary model should focus on directly teaching specifically chosen new words, coupled with strategies to ensure that students apply their newly acquired vocabulary in academic speaking and writing contexts.

Wide Reading: Students' vocabulary grows as a consequence of independent reading and increasing reading volume (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). As a teacher, you should provide students with an opportunity to independently read a significant number of books and texts each year. These books and texts should include both fiction and nonfiction in a variety of genres. Reading should be for a variety of purposes and across content areas. Students should read with fluency aloud and silently to support comprehension (Iowa Department of Education, (2006). Instructional decision making manual, Version 2.4. Des Moines, IA: Author.).

Direct Teaching of Important Individual Words:

Students learn new words via various teacher-directed instructional strategies (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). As a teacher, you should:

- ▶ Teach students words that are critical to understanding the text at hand, words with general utility likely to be encountered many times, and difficult words that need interpretation (metaphorical, abstract, nuanced). (See Figure 1, Tier 2)
1. Select a text that your student will be reading.
 2. List all the words that are likely to be unfamiliar to the students.
 3. Analyze the word list:
 - Which words can be categorized as Tier 2 words?
 - Which of the Tier 2 words are most necessary for comprehension?
 - Are there other words needed for comprehension? Which ones?
 4. On the basis of your analysis, which words will you teach? Which will need only brief attention? Which will you give more elaborate attention?

Teaching Word Learning Strategies: Students independently learn new word meanings when they learn to use word learning strategies, such as exploring context and analyzing prefixes (Edwards, Font, Baumann, & Boland, 2004; Graves, 2006). As a teacher, you should consider the options listed below to help students increase their proficiency at learning words:

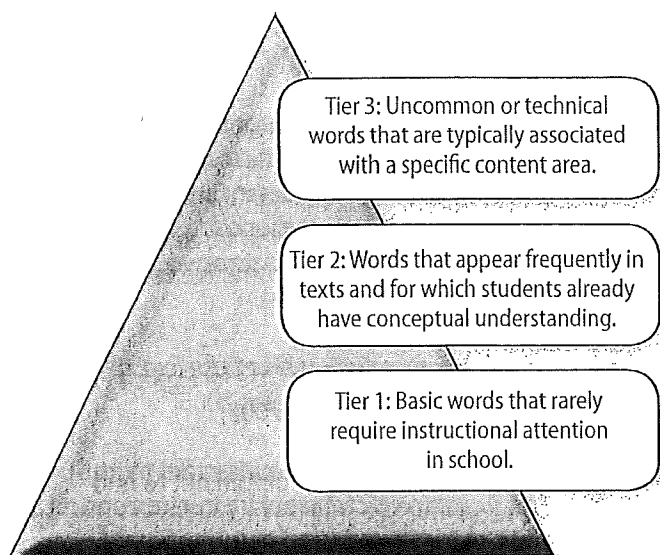
- ▶ Using context clues to unlock the meanings of unknown words
- ▶ Using word parts to unlock the meanings to unknown words
- ▶ Using the dictionary and related reference tools
- ▶ Developing a strategy for dealing with unknown words
- ▶ Adopting a personal approach

(Graves, 2006)

word walls

Collins FCA's?

Figure 1. Words to Teach Directly



Adapted from Beck et al. 2002

Fostering Word Consciousness: Students' vocabulary develops when they engage in various activities to increase language play, word choice in writing, and sensitivity to word parts (Nagy & Scott, 2000). As a teacher, you should:

- ▶ Create a classroom environment that encourages curiosity about words and their meanings.
- ▶ Provide repeated opportunities for students to identify, explore, and use new words found in text.
- ▶ Encourage correctness with language in discussions and writing.
- ▶ Foster awareness about words through the study of prefixes, suffixes, and roots.
- ▶ Help students see relationships between words.
- ▶ Involve students in conducting investigations as a context for learning and using new words.

Kids need this →

Scientific Research Based Instructional Sequence for Teaching Academic Vocabulary

There are a number of processes you can use to help students learn academic vocabulary. A few of those processes are highlighted below.

Guiding Instruction of Academic Vocabulary

1. Provide a description, explanation, or example of the new term.
2. Ask students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words.
3. Ask students to construct a picture, symbol, or graphic representing the term.
4. Engage students periodically in activities that help them add to their knowledge of the term in their notebooks.
5. Periodically ask students to discuss the terms with one another.
6. Involve students periodically in games that allow them to play with terms.

Building Academic Vocabulary (Marzano and Pickering, 2005)

Academic Vocabulary Words in Context

1. Read/paraphrase by introducing the context and reword it in a way that puts emphasis on the unfamiliar words.
2. Establish meaning of the context by asking students what is being said or what is going on, or tell us what those sentences are all about.
3. Initial identification/rationale - ask students to provide an idea of what the word might mean supported by a reason for their choice.
4. Consider further possibilities by asking if the student can think of other possible meanings or anything else the word might mean.
5. Summarize information that has been generated during the dialog about the unfamiliar word.

Bringing Words to Life (Beck, McKeown and Kucan, 2002)

Effective and Efficient Vocabulary Instructional Routine

1. **Pronounce** – guide the students in correctly pronouncing the word. Engage all students in saying the word together two or three times.
2. **Explain** – use language familiar to the students and provide a clear meaning of the word. If possible, provide a synonym or known phrase to solidify the connection between the new vocabulary term and the student's prior knowledge.
3. **Provide Examples** – should be drawn from a variety of contexts, not only the one used in the reading or lesson. Students will usually need at least two or three examples of a new term to firmly grasp the meaning.

4. **Elaborate** – provide learners an opportunity to elaborate word meanings by generating their own additional examples and visual representations.
5. **Assess** – incorporate regular informal vocabulary assessment into the instructional process. Assessment of vocabulary involves both formative, quick informal checking for understanding during the lesson, and summative evaluation in the form of quiz or test.

Narrowing the Language Gap: The Case for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction (Feldman and Kinsella, 2005)

Visit the PaTTAN website at www.pattan.net to find resources for Academic Vocabulary Instruction and more tools and tips for teachers.

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